



Lost Woods

The Discovered Writing of Rachel Carson

*For the Library of NCTC,
with all best wishes,
Linda Lear
3/10/10*

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BEACON PRESS
BOSTON

35982100001167

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Introduction

Rachel Carson's literary legacy is only four books. But those four books are enough to have changed how humankind regards the living world and the future of life on this earth. Her literary reputation rests primarily on two of them: *The Sea Around Us* (1951) and *Silent Spring* (1962), a book that changed the course of history.

The magnitude of Carson's impact on the public's understanding of such issues as ecology and environmental change still astonishes. Two volumes of her trilogy on the life of the sea, *The Sea Around Us* and *The Edge of the Sea*, were serialized in the *New Yorker*, and all three, including *Under the Sea-Wind* (1941), appeared on the *New York Times* best-seller list for months on end. *The Sea Around Us* maintained its place for a record eighty-six weeks and was eventually translated into more than forty languages. *Silent Spring* was also serialized in the *New Yorker*, making Carson the first woman writer to have three of her works introduced in its pages by 1962. It was translated into many languages, and still sells over 25,000 copies every year. Rachel Carson had garnered an international reputation as a natural scientist and public voice for the care of the earth by the time of her death in 1964. She was the most acclaimed science writer of her generation and a literary figure of first rank.

The purpose of *Lost Woods*, this collection of Carson's undiscovered and little known writing, is to give the reader what is missing from the more famous body of Carson's work—a sense

of her evolution as a natural scientist and a creative writer. Carson's unpublished and heretofore unknown literary output only heightens her importance as an environmental thinker. In this anthology, Carson's public and private voice speaks to our human condition and to the condition of our earth at the end of the millennium. Encompassing youthful writing, newspaper essays, field journals, speeches, articles, and letters, *Lost Woods* intimately reveals the intellectual process by which Carson became not just a literary celebrity, but one of the century's most important writers and social commentators, whose call to alarm took us all in a new direction and was the catalyst for the contemporary environmental movement.

The pace and pressure of Rachel Carson's life mitigated against there ever being a large body of writing. By nature she worked slowly and methodically, unwilling to move from one sentence to another until the first met her syntactical and lyrical satisfaction. She revised endlessly, read everything out loud, and then had it read back to her until she was satisfied with its tone, alliteration, and clarity. A perfectionist in form and structure, Carson was also a meticulous researcher whose demand for accuracy was legendary among her government colleagues, assistants, and editors.

It was gratifying for me to learn that Carson never finished a manuscript or an article on time with the exception of the feature stories she wrote for the Baltimore *Sun* in the 1930s. But it was heartrending to piece together the nearly overwhelming burden of family responsibility and emotional demand that prevented her from achieving the corpus of work that she dreamed of producing, and had the talent and vision to create.

Beginning in the late 1930s, Carson supported herself, her mother, her sister, and later her sister's two daughters, and her grand-nephew whom she adopted in 1957. A fifteen-year ca-

reer in the federal government as an aquatic biologist and editor relegated her writing to evenings and time snatched between weekend obligations, yet also deepened her experience of the living world and her commitment to preserving it.

The literary success of *The Sea Around Us* brought a measure of financial security and enabled Carson to devote all her time to her writing after 1952. She enjoyed only a few years of freedom before her mother's physical decline, her niece's death, and the needs of a young child again stole her creative time and taxed her emotional stamina. The last five years of Carson's life were a race against time and the course of terminal illness. Fighting a misdiagnosed and aggressive breast cancer, Carson endured the side effects of treatment and the ravages of what she called a "catalogue of illnesses" to complete *Silent Spring* and to defend it. What is remarkable is not that Carson produced such a small body of work, but that she was able to produce it at all.

Rachel Carson had plans for at least four other major works. She had been collecting material for a scientific study of evolution, and had a book contract for another, more philosophical examination of ecology. She had started to revise and expand an earlier magazine article on exploring the natural world with children, and she was intrigued by the new discoveries in atmospheric science and climate and hoped to write something in this emerging field. Carson's literary papers display a full range of topics that she had, in one way or another, committed herself to writing about, and many more that she hoped one day to have the time to pursue. But time ran out in April 1964.

Lost Woods helps us fill the gap between Carson's wishes and her accomplishments. Selections from her field notebooks and especially her public speeches give Rachel Carson a voice for generations who neither heard her speak nor saw her on the few television appearances she made. Although she never

thought of herself as a public figure, she became one, and was an accomplished public speaker as well, whose integrity captured the attention of the politically powerful and the average citizen alike. Her articles on the natural history of the Chesapeake region, her political acumen displayed in several editorial page letters, and her support of a wide variety of conservation and preservation efforts provide new facets to the better known lyrical writer on the sea, and trenchant critic of toxic chemicals.

The writings selected for *Lost Woods* are, for the most part, those I discovered in the course of my research for *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature*, in her papers at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. They have been chosen for their literary quality, as examples of important environmental thinking, and for the creative insight they provide into Carson's evolution as a scientist and science writer.

Several provide evidence of subjects about which Carson had an intense interest but never had opportunity to write about in any great depth. Other selections, including an article that appeared in *Holiday*, the preface to the second edition of *The Sea Around Us*, and the "Fable for Tomorrow" from *Silent Spring*, were published during Carson's lifetime and merit special attention. Some were published posthumously and are included here because of their scientific and literary quality and their biographical importance. A few others were published in journals, in newspapers, or as government documents and are no longer in print.

Carson once told her friend Dorothy Freeman that she considered her contributions to scientific fact less important than her attempts to awaken an emotional response to the world of nature. Describing the intent of her writing in a 1956 article on exploring nature with children, Carson wrote, "Once the emotions have been aroused—a sense of the beautiful, the ex-

citement of the new and the unknown, a feeling of sympathy, pity, admiration or love—then we wish for knowledge about the object of our emotional response. Once found, it has lasting meaning."

The woman, the scientist, the reformer, and especially the writer who emerges from this collection elegantly combined science and emotion, reason and humanity. *Lost Woods* gives Rachel Carson a new and more complete voice for nature.

Here one will find further evidence of the centrality of ecological relationships in Carson's thought, and of her understanding of environmental ontology—the wholeness of nature. Displayed here as well is Carson's deep anxiety over the future of nuclear technology and how it might alter the intricate fabric of life.

But these selections also show for the first time that Carson's well-known support of wilderness preservation and wildlife conservation was particularly directed to the preservation of the nation's remaining wild seashores—areas that were fast disappearing in her own time.

Two selections testify to Carson's deep interest in animal rights. These issues were a natural extension of her lifelong reverence for life. Had she lived longer, she certainly would have become more politically active and would have written in support of humane treatment of laboratory and farm animals.

Carson had only begun to explore the evidence of global climate change before she died. Research for her 1957 television script on clouds revitalized her early interest in atmospheric temperature and wind which she had studied and written about in *The Sea Around Us*. She wanted to pursue this subject, and was convinced even then of the important relationship between human activity and alterations in climate.

Carson has much to teach deep ecologists and environmen-

tal policy makers as they wrestle with the moral dilemma of whether or not to moderate their demands and conform to political reality. Many will find insight in Carson's editorial writing and in her speeches on how to create conditions conducive to environmental reform. Carson's understanding of political process and the need for flexibility and compromise, as well as for intellectual toughness, can only encourage those who, like her, are searching for ways to move a democratic system off dead center.

Finally I have chosen to include several intimate pieces of writing. Carson's field notebooks are filled with incisive biological and ecological observation, but they also contain lyric vignettes that capture moments of dazzling humility. Similarly in letters to her friends and Maine neighbors Dorothy and Stanley Freeman, to Curtis and Nellie Lee Bok, and to her physician, George Crile, Jr., Carson reveals her deep love for the living world, and in the process, her quiet courage.

Not only does *Lost Woods* contain the discovered writing of one of the great writers and thinkers of our time, but it also illuminates a whole new Rachel Carson. Her outwardly calm and placid public life disguised the private passion as well as the complexity of her love for the natural world and her commitment to its wholeness. It is my hope that in this new collection of Rachel Carson's writing, readers may find and appreciate her varied and timeless voice.

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